

**6.** When Cima's father asks Hig why he came to their canyon—why he flew beyond the point of no return—Hig can't find an answer. What might have prompted Hig to take that risk? What was he looking for?

---

**7.** When they decide to take a ewe and a ram with them on the plane, Hig says, "Like the Ark. Here we go" [p. 273]. He says it jokingly, but does the novel offer a sense of hope that life on the planet might continue, postapocalypse? What other biblical references occur in the novel?

---

**8.** The Dog Stars is a serious book about a devastating subject, but what are some of its more lighthearted moments? Why is it important that the book have this mixture of tenderness and violence, anxiety and peace?

---

**9.** What has caused the end of human civilization in the novel? Why have the scattered survivors become so savage? Does the postapocalyptic world Heller presents seem accurate and likely, given the state of the world today?

---

**10.** Why is Hig's relationship with Cima so important in the novel? What makes it particularly touching, given what each of them has suffered?

---

**11.** The novel's ending is ambiguous. Cima, Hig, Bangley, and Pops have formed a kind of family, the spruce and aspen are coming back, eagles and hawks are flourishing, but the trout and elk are gone, water is disappearing, and mysterious jets are flying overhead. What might happen next, or in the next ten years, for these characters and the world they live in?

---

**12.** Why does Heller conclude The Dog Stars with Hig's favorite poem "When Will I Be Home?" by Li Shang-Yin? Why is this a fitting way to end the story? In what ways is the novel about the longing for home?

---

**13.** What does the novel imply about human nature, after the constraints of civilization have been removed? What does it suggest about the possible consequences of the way we are living now?

---

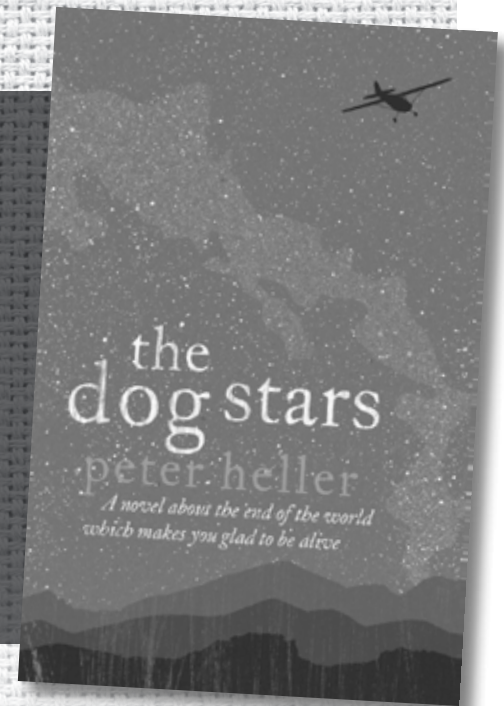
**14.** What similarities does The Dog Stars share with other recent dystopian novels like The Hunger Games and The Road? In what important ways does it differ from them?

---

## Discussion Questions

"From start to finish, Heller carries the reader aloft on graceful prose, intense action, and deeply felt emotion."

— *Publisher's Weekly*



Kalamazoo  
Public Library



**Peter Heller** is a longtime contributor to NPR, and a contributing editor at Outside Magazine, Men's Journal, and National Geographic Adventure. He is an award winning adventure writer and the author of four books of literary nonfiction. *The Dog Stars*, his first novel, was published in 2012.

Heller was born and raised in New York. He attended high school in Vermont and Dartmouth College in New Hampshire where he became an outdoorsman and whitewater kayaker. He traveled the world as an expedition kayaker, writing about challenging descents in the Pamirs, the Tien Shan mountains, the Caucasus, Central America and Peru.

At the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he received an MFA in fiction and poetry, he won a Michener fellowship for his epic poem "The Psalms of Malvine." He has worked as a dishwasher, construction worker, logger, offshore fisherman, kayak instructor, river guide, and world class pizza deliverer. Some of these stories can be found in *Set Free in China*, *Sojourns on the Edge*. In the winter of 2002 he joined, on the ground team, the most ambitious whitewater expedition in history as it made its way through the treacherous Tsangpo Gorge in Eastern Tibet. He chronicled what has been called "The Last Great Adventure Prize" for Outside, and in his book *Hell or High Water: Surviving Tibet's Tsangpo River*.

The gorge—three times deeper than the Grand Canyon—is sacred to Buddhists, and is the inspiration for James Hilton's *Shangri La*. It is so deep there are tigers and leopards in the bottom and raging 25,000 foot peaks at the top, and so remote and difficult to traverse that a mythical waterfall, sought by explorers since Victorian times, was documented for the first time in 1998 by a team from National Geographic. The book won a starred review from *Publisher's Weekly*, was number three on *Entertainment Weekly's* "Must List" of all pop culture, and a *Denver Post* review ranked it "up there with any adventure writing ever written."

In December, 2005, on assignment for *National Geographic Adventure*, he joined the crew of an eco-pirate ship belonging to the radical environmental group the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society as it sailed to Antarctica to hunt down and disrupt the Japanese whaling fleet.

## Book Summary

A riveting, powerful novel about a pilot living in a world filled with loss—and what he is willing to risk to rediscover, against all odds, connection, love, and grace. Hig survived the flu that killed everyone he knows. His wife is gone, his friends are dead, he lives in the hangar of a small abandoned airport with his dog, his only neighbor a gun-toting misanthrope.

In his 1956 Cessna, Hig flies the perimeter of the airfield or sneaks off to the mountains to fish and to pretend that things are the way they used to be. But when a random transmission somehow beams through his radio, the voice ignites a hope deep inside him that a better life—something like his old life—exists beyond the airport. Risking everything, he flies past his point of no return—not enough fuel to get him home—following the trail of the static-broken voice on the radio. But what he encounters and what he must face—in the people he meets, and in himself—is both better and worse than anything he could have hoped for.

Narrated by a man who is part warrior and part dreamer, a hunter with a great shot and a heart that refuses to harden, *The Dog Stars* is both savagely funny and achingly sad, a breathtaking story about what it means to be human.

## Discussion Questions

1. The prose style of *The Dog Stars* is clipped, terse, often fragmented. Why would Heller choose this way of writing this particular story? In what ways is it fitting?
2. At the beginning of Chapter III, the narrator wonders why he's telling this story. What might be his motivations? Who does he imagine his audience will be?
3. Hig says that Bangley "had been waiting for the End all his life.... He didn't do anything that wasn't aimed at surviving" [p. 71]. He also clearly enjoys killing people. In what ways is Hig different from Bangley? How did "the End" affect him? How does he feel about killing?
4. How and why does Hig's relationship with Bangley change over the course of the novel?
5. Jasper's death is a turning point for Hig. How and why does it affect him so powerfully?